

**Institution: University of Sussex**

**Unit of Assessment: UoA 34 Art History**

**Title of case study:**

Agents of Change: Photography and the Politics of Space

### 1. Summary of the impact

As a result of Benedict Burbridge's work on photographic practices, he was asked to co-curate the Brighton Photo Biennial 2012, entitled *Agents of Change: Photography and the Politics of Space*. The Biennial had an impact on viewers' understanding of photography, photographic practices and the contingent meaning of photographic images. It also affected the artistic practice of participants and influenced a number of students to see connections between art and politics. Burbridge's research shaped the Biennial's thirteen exhibitions: he invited its artists and organised the exhibition of work in unusual spaces and modes that highlighted connections between image and context by underlining the influence that setting has on meaning.

### 2. Underpinning research

Burbridge's research addresses issues of photographic practice. The research was developed and expanded from his work on photography and protest, published in a special issue of *Photoworks* co-edited by Burbridge in 2011 [see Section 3, R1]. For *Agents of Change*, he considered the relationships between the contemporary-image culture and the politics of space. Research was carried out *through* the Biennial; it is an example of research through practice.

The process of research that shaped the *Agents of Change* exhibitions involved several strands. Existing literature on art and activism has generally focused on issues of participation in socially engaged art, whereas work on photography and politics has centred around issues of contested representation. The innovation of the Biennial lay in brokering dialogues between art and activism in terms of specific image cultures and the spaces in which they are disseminated. Research drew on writing by Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey on the politics of space; Guy Debord, the Retort network and Julian Stallabrass on issues of spectacle and digital culture; and Nato Thomas, Jorge Ribalata and Clare Bishop on socially engaged art. Burbridge considered specific image-based practices and recent essays by Ariella Azoulay, Saskia Sassen, Liam Devlin and Negar Azimi on photography and activism. He interviewed those involved with grassroots political activity and undertook critical study of their literature. He developed a detailed understanding of a variety of contemporary lens-based art practices through several means: visual analysis during visits to festivals, exhibitions and studios, interviews with artists and the critical study of relevant specialist literature. This process of research conceptualised the exhibitions of *Agents of Change*, the dedicated issue of *Photoworks* co-edited by Burbridge [R2] and a large public programme. Key aspects of the research were mapped in an essay in the special issue of *Photoworks*, which highlighted the types of connection between the different image practices the Biennial set out to forge and introduced the overarching conceptual framework that made the connections meaningful. The publication placed photo-journalism, art photography, community-based projects and a diverse set of activist image-practices in dialogue. These dialogues were reflected in commissioned texts, drawing together the voices of squatters, members of Occupy, curators, academics and artists to create an assemblage of primary sources. Each addressed a specific practice in relation to Burbridge's overarching conceptual framework.

In *Agents of Change*, meaning was generated cumulatively across the exhibitions. Many projects exhibited in the Biennial had initially been disseminated as newspapers and fly-posters, using photography to intervene in the urban landscape. *Agents of Change's* gallery-based exhibitions aimed to examine the 'traffic' of such photographs, as they moved from street to gallery wall. The different modes of presentation and dissemination were juxtaposed to spotlight how the place in which images are seen shapes the likely audience and the understanding of images. This approach was extended by placing a number of interventions directly in Brighton's urban

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landscape. *Agents of Change* displayed photographs relating to the history of political occupation in Brighton, not in galleries but in the city itself, as fly-posters, newspapers and light-boxes.

### 3. References to the research

- R1** Burbridge, B. (2011) 'Photography and protest', *Photoworks*, 16: 16–23. Includes a round-table discussion – Them and Us: The Making and Dissemination of the Photography of Protest – organised and structured by Burbridge.
- R2** Burbridge, B. (2012/3) 'A cry and a demand: notes on photography and the politics of space', in Burbridge, B. (co-ed.) 'Agents of change: photography and the politics of space: a special issue of *Photoworks*, 19: 45–54.

Outputs can be supplied by the University on request.

### 4. Details of the impact

Visitors to *Agents of Change* commented that the exhibitions changed the way in which they perceived photography and, through photography, understood global politics. There was also an impact on the artists who participated in the Biennial – some of whom re-conceptualised their work as a result of the exhibition – and on a particular group of students, who saw art history, and the connections between art and politics, in a new way. The impact is confirmed by quantitative indicators, critiques, citations in various media and evidence of public engagement.

- **Impact on visitors**

The Biennial attracted 63,100 visitors from 6 October to 4 November 2012, an improvement on the next-largest Biennial attendance in 2010, with 60,000 visitors [see Section 5, C1]. The special issue of *Photoworks* magazine had a readership of over 10,000 [C2].

The specific impact on visitors and readers can be demonstrated through documented responses, in terms of formal evaluation [C3], posts on online blogs and forums [C4] and short responses posted on social networking sites such as Twitter [C5]. There were about 40 mentions of BPB12 or @photoworks\_uk on social networking sites each day. These frequently make reference to a new or expanded engagement with the role that images play in relation to political activism, and show a heightened awareness of specific issues spotlighted through Burbridge's research, including the use of military drones in Pakistan, the effects of Control Orders, the aims of squatters, and the way in which urban explorers use photography to lend transparency to the urban environment. When BPB12 featured among the most-used Twitter hash-tags in the Brighton area during the Biennial's opening weekend, visitors were responding to discussions and exhibitions generated through Burbridge's research.

*Agents of Change* received significant local, national and international media attention. This drew attention to the politics of the exhibition as framed by Burbridge and, because of the density of coverage, had the potential to influence numerous members of the public both to visit the Biennial and to think about the issues Burbridge raised [C6]. In addition, Burbridge was invited to write about his work on art and squatting for the *Guardian* website; he appeared on BBC South TV to talk about the images of local protest, and was interviewed twice on local radio about the overarching framework for *Agents of Change*. The festival was also reviewed in all the major photography publications, including *Aperture*, *Foam*, *Source*, *Photo Monitor* and *Culture24* [C7.1, C7.2]. It received a substantial review from Sarah James in the January issue of *Frieze* [C7.3].

- **Impact on students**

The Biennial outreach programme targeted 70 AS-Level students from state-run sixth-form colleges. The sessions with the students dealt with issues including the political uses of photography, the impact of digitisation, the roles played by museums and galleries, and the relationships between context and meaning. Evaluation shows that many of the students had not thought about these issues before; several had never attended an exhibition of this nature

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[C8]. Their responses show that *Agents of Change* also increased their understanding of Art History as a discipline, a type of impact important for the field. The Biennial also attracted registered visits from at least 15 colleges and institutions of learning; UCL lecturers notified us that essays on *Agents of Change* were written by the group from UCL Art History.

- **Impact on artistic practice**

Burbridge's research affected artists, activists and staff involved with the Biennial. It shaped understandings of their own practices through an engagement with the Biennial's overarching theme, at the same time as creating further professional opportunities based on the exposure it provided. Staff at the Biennial have spoken about the ways in which the research affected their understanding of photography's place in contemporary culture, and recorded that Burbridge's self-reflexive approach to curating will shape their future work. For example, Oliver Whitehead, Programme and Participation Coordinator with *Photoworks*, has started a collaborative project based upon artistic interventions in different public spaces [C9.1], while *Photoworks* has revised its approach to commissioning to open further dialogues between art photography and mass cultural image-practices corroboration [C9.2]. Political activists and academics Alex Casper and Bradley Garrett have commented on ways in which the Biennial made them aware of links between their activities and aspects of contemporary-art practice [C9.3]. Artists Ronnie Close, Corinne Silva, Jason Larkin and Thompson and Craighead have each spoken about the importance of the dialogues manufactured through Burbridge's research in understanding their own practice, and the work they plan to produce. [C9.4] They have also pointed to the invitations to exhibit and lecture about their work that have arisen as a direct result of their involvement with *Agents of Change*.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**C1** Visitor records from the exhibition organisers

**C2** *Photoworks'* readership figures are based on *Photoworks'* research with libraries and subscribers on readers per copy. This was undertaken in 2007 in relation to the general print run of 3,500 copies, the print run for the *Agents of Change* issue. The feedback shows a readership of approximately 10,885.

**C3** Descriptive responses to the Biennial were logged on the survey by 173 members of the public. These include:

- *16 Nov 2012, 1:01pm*: It made me more aware of the sheer scope of the Occupy movement. It really is a global push for change. In that context, BPB sharpened my political senses.
- *15 Nov 2012, 1:44pm*: The theme *Agents of Change* made me question a lot about my role as a photographer. Is it enough to be a passive witness to an event, to not try to implement some form of change when the issue you are documenting involves people with a lower quality of life than yourself and are in need of help in some way?
- *20 Nov 2012, 12:00am*: I was inspired by the emphasis on zines, alternative media and the desire by several photographers to extend the social power of their work beyond the gallery space.
- *20 Nov 2012, 11:45am*: I very much enjoyed Trevor Paglen's exhibition at The Lighthouse. His work inspires me to know more about the world we live in, to know about the secret side of our governments and the reasons behind their secrecy.

**C4** We have tracked over 30 blogs. Examples of their texts include:  
<http://www.photoworks.org.uk/blog/post/00000000042>

- 'For me *BPB12* was not first and foremost a photographic experience but a political education.....'

<http://dave-bartlett.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/brighton-photo-biennial-2012-study-visit.html>

- 'Overall, a great day ... and one which gave me a lot to think about in how I consider

photographs and try and interpret the artistic intent’.

- C5** Twitter feeds: a series of about 40 exchanges per day were posted during the Biennial. See *Storify*: [http://storify.com/natalie\\_l\\_lloyd/brighton-photo-biennial-2012-bpb12](http://storify.com/natalie_l_lloyd/brighton-photo-biennial-2012-bpb12)
- C6** The Biennial was reviewed in the national press:
- Peter Popham, in *The Independent on Sunday* (23 September 2012), wrote: ‘Brighton’s extraordinary Photo Biennial is in its fifth season, and this year it is edgier than ever. With every archive or photographer they select, the curators needle away at the question: What is the point of photography today? What sort of truth can it tell?’
- C7** The Biennial was reviewed in key photography journals:
- C7.1** Jason Oddy, in *Aperture* (8 January 2013)
- C7.2** Persilia Catton, in *Photo-Monitor* (23 November 2012)
- C7.3** Sarah James in *Frieze* (January 2013)
- C8** Outreach evaluation was undertaken, and responses to a question about benefits included:
- I have gained more understanding of how images can have such different meanings behind them. (5).
  - I have learned to look at things in a different way and analyse how other people live and how the media make us perceive the world (68).
  - Gained insight into art being used as a form of protest to portray a political message (10).
  - A new perspective of how to look at art (16).
- C9** Acknowledgement from activists, artists and others, of impact on their work:
- C9.1** Oliver Whitehead, Programme and Participation Coordinator with *Photoworks* throughout the period of BPB12, wrote: ‘My future development is directly related to the work I carried out under Dr Burbridge; the symposia, conferences, artist talks and workshops I worked on all enhanced my own cultural thinking’.
- C9.2** Celia Davies, Editor of *Photoworks*, wrote: ‘Research conducted through BPB12 has informed developments in *Photoworks*’ current programming strategy. [Including] themed commissions that actively explore meaningful ways of working outside the usual gallery contexts and across our programme strands, including BPB, education and participation projects and our publishing output in print and online.
- C9.3** Alex Casper, Brighton activist who works with squatters and the homeless, after the Biennial, encouraged several homeless people to show their work in a squat.
- Bradley Garrett, a student and artist in Oxford, noted ‘The theme of the event, “the politics of space”, encouraged me to interrogate some of the more political aspects of the practice and to speak about them for the first time publically. As a result, the trajectory of my writing about the practice has become increasingly political over the past few months.’ (letter, 25/2/2013)
- C9.4** Corinne Silva: ‘Working with Benedict Burbridge on the curation of the show led to new ways of conceiving my *Badlands* series as a wall installation.’
- Ronnie Close noted: ‘The public forums and opportunity to exhibit work in the BPB allowed for a useful discursive platform for my research. It was my first publication of the work and aided a process to deepen and develop the key concerns of art and politics in my practice.’